

Foreseen ruins and spectral artifacts. Toyo Ito's failed project for the 'Relaxation Park' in Torrevieja, Spain

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In recent decades, Spanish urban planning has been shaped by a succession of large-scale architectural projects, promoted under the guise of progress and global competitiveness. Closely tied to tourism, real estate speculation, and the pursuit of international visibility, many of these projects were presented as emblems of modernity and transformation, seeking to place the cities on the international architectural map. However, these projects have produced a mixed legacy: while some projects succeeded in consolidating new urban landscapes, a body of unfinished or disused projects persists, highlighting the contradictions of urban planning governed by the logic of immediate image and profitability. In this context, the 'Relaxation Park' of Torrevieja [Fig. 01], designed by Japanese architect Toyo Ito, is a paradigmatic example. Conceived in the early 2000s as a spa and wellness complex in a heavily urbanized tourist enclave, the project aspired to diversify the Mediterranean city's cultural offerings, strengthening its international reach. Despite this, the gap between the initial ambition and the political, economic, and social conditions that underpinned it led to a radically different fate: the halting of construction and almost immediate ruin of the first building.

This paper proposes that the case of Torrevieja allows us to understand how certain architectures, being inscribed within speculative dynamics, are doomed from their origin to become foreseen ruins, which we define here under the concept of "spectral artifacts": buildings with great initial visibility but lacking a stable and lasting program, which end up being inserted into the territory as economic burdens and urban voids. The term "spectral artifact" is an ambiguous or ghostly manifestation of a reality, an illusory presence of what has never been. They are structural architectures or built objects that embody a ghostly and symbolic presence within the urban and cultural environment, either because they evoke memories, ideologies, or because their meaning and function are absent or distorted. We apply the concept of "artifact" to a technical object, but also to architectural pieces laden with symbolic intentionality: a building, a ruin, a monument, or even a void with a historical and social charge. The adjective "spectral"

refers to the ethereal, that which appears without being fully present. By this, we refer to an aesthetic that plays with illusion, simulation, or evocation, and with memory, with something which has been erased and at the same time it refuses to disappear.

The concept of spectral artifact proposed in this article draws on a theoretical genealogy that links the notions of ruin, simulacrum, and phantasmagoria in contemporary culture. First, it embraces Jacques Derrida's concept of the *spectral* as a quality of something that is neither completely present nor completely absent¹, yet nevertheless, it has the capacity to continue influencing the collective memory of a place. Secondly, in architecture, this condition has been explored by authors such as Ignasi de Solà-Morales with his concept of *terrain vague*², those residual urban spaces that preserve the memory of suspended time, and with his criticism of "architectures without program", proposing an architectural phenomenon in the postmodern city, converted into a stage for consumption, leisure, and spectacle³. On the other hand, the emergence of the *megaprojects*^{4,5} of the mid-20th century, which would translate at the end of the last century into the abuse of *flagship developments*^{6,7} without a specific function, and which mark the transformation of architectural practice towards indeterminacy with buildings as objects that are disconnected from their sociocultural contexts, this characteristic reflects Jean Baudrillard's theories of simulacrum and seduction, referring to simulacra as copies without an original, images that replace the reality they evoke⁸. Thirdly, the concept glimpses the use of picturesque representation, with the continuous contrast between nature and artifice that has a certain phantasmal or illusory presence⁹, and which makes spectral artifacts persist as material traces of a frustrated urban desire. They manifest themselves as a premature ruin in an empty setting, incapable of being translated into an effective urban piece.

Through a contextual, formal, and critical analysis of Toyo Ito's Project, we seek to provide a detailed understanding of its causes and consequences, placing it within the genealogy of failed architectures that characterized Spanish urban development at the turn of the 21st century. The research was conducted using a qualitative approach focused on the Relaxation Park of Torrevieja case study. First, urban planning and media documentation related to the Relaxation Park project were compiled, including press releases, technical reports, and graphic material. Second, a formal and spatial analysis of the project was conducted based on existing plans and photographs with the aim of identifying the architectural and landscape decisions that structured the proposal. Finally, the findings were contextualized within the genealogy of flagship developments as landmark projects in Spain since the 1990s, which allowed us to establish similarities and differences with other failed cases. This methodological approach seeks to highlight how socioeconomic and political conditions are inscribed in architectural materiality, resulting in what is defined here as a spectral artifact.

Development and touristification: an ambitious Torrevieja

The case of the city of Torrevieja represents a prime example of the Mediterranean coastal development. Located in the Vega Baja del Segura, in the province of Alicante, the tourist city is surrounded by an area of great scenic and environmental value, between the Mediterranean Sea and the lagoons of La Mata and Torrevieja. This coastal city was linked to salt production, fishing, and agriculture, with a very limited permanent population from the beginning of the 20th century, with 7,706 inhabitants, until the 1960s, with around 7,726 inhabitants¹⁰. From then on, a major transformation of the small town began due to the tourism phenomenon and the real estate construction sector¹¹, which led Torrevieja to become one of the main tourist centers in Spain in the following decades: first, with the opening of the Franco's regime to international tourism, mainly from Sweden and Germany, and later as a summer resort for many Spanish families who bought or rented a second home, exclusively for summertime use.

During the final decades of the 20th century and the early years of the 21st century, Torrevieja established itself as one of the epicenters of sun, beach, and fun tourism¹². Its urban growth was marked by its generally flat geography, which fostered the massive construction of second homes and the arrival of foreigners attracted by the sunny weather, low housing costs, and emerging tourism infrastructures. Between 1980 and 2005, housing construction in the municipality practically tripled, generating strong pressure on land and a dynamic of extensive urbanization [Fig. 02 and 03]. This context of expansion was accompanied by intense land rezoning processes, where real estate value took precedence over comprehensive urban planning. Local institutions, in tune with a political climate dominated by the economic euphoria of the real estate bubble, promoted unique projects that sought to provide the city with a renewed cultural and tourist profile.

Thus, in the early 2000s, Torrevieja City Council promoted a revitalization plan for the municipality with the intention of conveying a new image of the city and attracting higher-income tourism that would bring more earnings back to the city. It was within this context that the council commissioned the Relaxation Park to the architect Toyo Ito in the year 2000. This responded both to a regional marketing strategy and to the desire to associate the city of Torrevieja with an internationally renowned figure in contemporary architecture. The project was located on a plot of land totalling more than 8 hectares, situated between the two lagoons at the so-called "Punta de la Vïbora" [Fig. 04], with the aim of creating a sustainable complex that would highlight the region's natural surroundings and exploit beauty and wellness tourism. However, this commitment took place in a fragmented and saturated urban fabric, where the short-term logic of real estate speculation contrasted with the need for stable and sustainable long-term infrastructure.

The Project for the Relaxation Park of Torrevieja

The Relaxation Park was conceived as an internationally renowned thermal and wellness complex. The proposal included a spa with thermal bath areas, a hydrotherapy area featuring saline water and its mineral richness, as well as observation spaces linked to the landscape of the salt lagoons and recreational areas with a café. Toyo Ito's project sought to articulate a sensorial journey around water, light and nature, placing visitors on a ride of relaxation and contemplation. Ito's vision envisioned an exceptional space destined to offer an urban escape inspired by Japanese hot springs, a perfect pivot toward the higher-end tourism sought by the municipal administration.

On a formal level, the project sought a strong integration with the surrounding landscape. The complex would consist of three helical or shell-shaped buildings, erected with lightweight wooden structures placed on elevated reinforced concrete platforms. The arrangement of the elevated platforms was intended to minimize the impact on the terrain and offer viewpoints overlooking La Mata and Torrevieja' lagoons. To camouflage them, the complex rested on artificial dunes intended to preserve the privacy of the site – and its users – from the surrounding homes. However, this decision altered the natural topography, generating a paradox between the discourse of lightness and landscape integration and the artificial transformation of the immediate surroundings. This gesture became more intended to preserve the secluded and exclusive character, introducing an artifice that clashed with the supposed lightness of the project. Furthermore, the complex of buildings was conceived as a wellness itinerary in which the architecture served as a mediator between the visitor and the natural landscape of the salt lagoons. To achieve this, Ito proposed a sequence of spaces organized around three experiential axes: water, light, and nature. Along the route, spaces open to the exterior would be interspersed with more intimate, enclosed spaces, so that the architectural experience transcended the functional to enter the sensorial. From a material and spatial perspective, the Relaxation Park combined the formal innovation characteristic of Toyo Ito's work with a weak programmatic definition. Beyond the thermal facilities and the café, the Project lacked a solid program that would guarantee its long-term sustainability, in a city like Torrevieja, marked by strong population fluctuations between the different seasons of the year. This lack of definition, coupled with the economic and political difficulties we will see below, made it a clear example of how commitment to architectural spectacularity can ignore the functional and social requirements of its context.

The project was approved in the year 2001 at the height of the Spanish real estate bubble, with Torrevieja City Council focused on revamping its main economic engine¹³. The works were put out to tender with an initial budget of €1.5 million, and began in the year

2003 with the first of the three snail-shaped buildings, the one closest to the homes in the Torreta III housing development. However, the project soon experienced significant cost overruns, with the total tender estimated to be €7 million, as the entire initial budget was allocated to build the first building between 2003 and 2004. In 2004, the “Dirección General de Costas” halted the works following a negative decision on the urban permits, as the Relaxation Park complex was located on protected land, part of the ancient wetland linked to the two lagoons. After years in limbo and successive delays in execution, coupled with the 2008 economic crisis and changes in local government, the project failed to overcome the logistical, financial, and urban management challenges and was ultimately halted altogether.

Despite being partially built, Torrevieja's Relaxation Park was never fully inaugurated, nor did it consolidate a stable program in its only completed building. Currently, the snail object remains in a state of total abandonment, transformed into a media ruin and a residual space that contrasts with the initial ambition of the commission [Fig.06]. More than an active facility, it constitutes a failed infrastructure that illustrates the fragility of iconic projects when they are inserted into urban contexts governed by speculative dynamics and unstable political situations. Thus, “the shell” can be read as a spectral artifact not only because of its appearance and materiality, but also because of its suspended status between the public sphere, architecture, and the failed monument. It is an object that invokes a futuristic vision of public space, but which today appears as an early ruin of the formal ideals of *starchitecture* and the experience of the post-industrial city.

The Relaxation Park as a spectral artifact

The case study of the Relaxation Park enables us to reflect on the tensions among architecture, economics, and urban policy that characterized Spain at the beginning of the 21st century. Beyond its status as an unfinished project, the complex exemplifies the logic of urban planning that subordinates the value of use to the value of image, where architecture operated as an instrument of territorial marketing rather than a lasting social mechanism. But the case of Torrevieja is not isolated, as projects such as the CREA in Alcorcón, the Castellón airport, the Oviedo Conference Center, or the City of Culture in Galicia reveal a common dynamic: the creation of oversized infrastructures whose main driving force was political and media visibility, rather than economic or social viability. These underutilised or disused architectures compose a landscape of urban spectres that testify to the fragility of the spectacle paradigm in the post-industrial era.

In the case of the Relaxation Park of Torrevieja, the fragility of the functional program, the dependence on a speculative economic context, and the absence of real public demand placed the project in a position of structural vulnerability. From its inception, the Relaxation Park was conditioned by a

paradox: it sought to represent a city saturated with generic buildings with an architectural icon, but using an imported model that was disconnected from local culture. This distance between symbolic ambition and territorial reality is what we believe turns the project into a foreseen ruin. In this sense, the project can be understood as a spectral artifact: an architecture that retains the materiality of an iconic project but has lost all functionality and meaning. Its physical presence refers to an unfulfilled promise of a future that has never been materialized. The concept of spectral artifact is presented here, more than as an aesthetic category, as a critical tool to read the traces of failure in the post-industrial city: inert spaces that condense the desire and collapse of a development model based on the spectacle¹⁴.

Spectral artifacts represent those architectures that, ambitious in form, are empty of function, so their failure lies not only in poor management but in an urban logic that prioritizes spectacle over sustainability. Among their essential characteristics we find (1) a high initial investment with negative or zero return, (2) disconnection with the urban and sociocultural fabric where they are implanted, (3) a frustrated symbolic narrative, (4) unfinished or ruined aesthetics, and (5) persistent memory of vagueness and absence [Fig.09]. The study of the Relaxation Park confirms that the combination of a programmatic weakness, the cost overruns for the construction, and the disconnection with the urban and sociocultural dynamics of Torrevieja transformed a proposal of high formal value into a ghostly object. On the other hand, its construction on land belonging to the protected area of the La Mata and Torrevieja lagoons, and therefore unsuitable for development, condemned it to economic and political incapacity and subsequent abandonment. At the same time, the abandoned shell-shaped building persists as a material trace of frustrated urban desire, an icon of the Spanish real estate bubble. And it is because of this ruin aesthetic that it acts as a reminder of the speculative urban planning of the early 21st century, a tangible testament to the construction euphoria of that time.

Conclusions

The analysis of Toyo Ito's project for the Relaxation Park of Torrevieja allows us to understand how iconic architecture, when inserted into urban contexts dominated by speculation and image politics, can become spectral artifacts, symbolizing the vulnerability of an urban development model that is no longer sustainable. Through the case study, we can trace the anatomy of the rise and fall of these ‘artifacts’, between global architecture, political ambition, and local economic dynamics. It is the current example of unfinished architecture, a symbol of the lack of effective urban planning that contributes to the revitalization or logical regeneration and regrowth of cities. What began as a high-visibility project for the city of Torrevieja and for Toyo Ito in Spain, ended up emphasizing an urban void in an already degraded area on the city's periphery.

Likewise, as a case study, it offers several lessons on urban development, architectural priorities, and the balance between ambition and practicality. The findings derived from the analysis of the Relaxation Park confirm the hypothesis that architectures conceived under the logic of spectacle tend to become spectral artifacts when they lack a defined program, a relationship with local dynamics, and sustainable long-term economic planning. The case of Torre vieja illustrates how a project preconceived as an international landmark ended up, after cost overruns and political changes, integrating into the urban landscape as a material and symbolic ruin, representative of a Spanish urban development model that prioritized immediate visibility over long-term viability. Toyo Ito's project, conceived as a benchmark for branding the city of Torre vieja, would offer an architectural and visual spectacle that did not align with the climatic context nor the social demands of the Mediterranean city. However, once the first phase was completed, we couldn't help but question why the project wasn't repurposed to prevent the decay that persists to this day. Beyond its failure, the Relaxation Park of Torre vieja offers us an opportunity to reflect on the possibility of reusing and redefining this type of abandoned infrastructure. Its study contributes to recognizing the limitations of the paradigm of architectural spectacularity and to asserting the need for projects more attentive to their context. From this perspective, the notion of the spectral artifact is proposed not only as a critical category but also as a tool for interpreting the future of contemporary cities.

Finally, the case of the Relaxation Park of Torre vieja allows us to critically interpret the legacy of a period of real estate and tourism expansion that has left numerous unfinished businesses in Spain. The disconnection from the social and urban fabric of projects like the Relaxation Park facilitated their spread to any city worldwide. By reproducing them in Torre vieja as a "catch-all" strategy, their symbolic value of progress was blurred from the outset, giving way to the symbolic value of the wrecked and spectral. However, the identification of these artifacts should not be understood solely as a diagnosis of failure, but as an opportunity to propose the reuse of infrastructure useful to citizens. Understanding these architectures does not only involve studying them as ruins, but as symptoms of an exhausted urban model. Their analysis allows us to rethink architecture from the perspective of contingency, public function, and the critical memory of built space. The study of the Relaxation Park of Torre vieja allows us to problematize the concept of the spectral artifact as an "architectural presence" and opens a fertile field for critical reflection on the spectral nature of certain contemporary interventions in urban space, especially in cities experiencing urban shrinkage. Future research could explore strategies of temporary reprogramming, the integration of these constructions into already active cultural networks, or community activation that redefines the architectures of the spectacle. In this sense, the spectral artifact

describes those architectures that, even devoid of use or function, maintain an aura of visibility and desire, recalling the tensions between modernity, representation, and obsolescence that so characterize the post-industrial city.

The concept of spectral artifact, therefore, allows us to critically interpret the legacy of a period of real estate and tourism expansion that has left numerous unfinished traces on Spanish territory. The project for the Relaxation Park not only sought to serve as a modern spa but also sought to position Torre vieja as a high-end, sustainable tourist destination. The choice of a prestigious architect like Toyo Ito for its design was also intrinsically linked to marketing and tourism promotion objectives, inspiring the Japanese wellness architecture that was so popular in the 2000s. Initially intended to become a symbol of a new identity and prosperity for Torre vieja, the project sought to attract higher-income visitors, investors, and perhaps permanent residents with the promise of unique experiences and job opportunities, all of which would help to move away from its image linked to mass tourism and the "Un, dos, tres" apartments.

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Spectral artifact
Relaxation Park
Toyo Ito
Ruin
Iconic architecture

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